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ABSTRACT

Using Alice's experience in "Through the Looking Glass" as inspiration, this paper recounts how preservice teachers journey through their field-based experiences and gain increasing insights into the teaching profession. The paper illustrates their progression with notes from several reflective logs which will eventually become papers for a methods course. According to the paper, for one female student teacher the decision to become a secondary school English teacher was arrived at after coming to an understanding of "self" in school settings. The paper takes a male student from the first week of his log through the thirteenth week and concludes with the voice of another female preservice teacher who finds it exciting to think of participating more fully in the development of high school students as learners and as human beings. (NKA)

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THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS:
PRESERVICE TEACHERS FIND THEIR VOICES

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THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS:

PRESERVICE TEACHERS FIND THEIR VOICES

Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking-Glass ends with the two queens examining Alice, rushing her through schoolroom subjects, and twisting the subjects topsy-turvy:

> "...'Can you do Subtraction? Take nine from eight."
>
> "'Nine from eight I can't, you know," Alice replied very readily; but--
>
> "'She can't do Subtraction,' said the White Queen. 'Can you do Division? Divide a loaf by a knife--what's the answer to *that*?
>
> "'I suppose--' Alice was beginning, but the Red Queen answered for her. 'Bread and butter, of course.'...
>
> "Do you know Languages? What's the French for fiddle-de-dee?
>
> "'Fiddle-de-dee's not English,' Alice replied gravely.
>
> "'Whoever said it was?' said the Red Queen.
>
> "Alice thought she saw a way out of the difficulty, this time. "If you'll tell me what language fiddle-de-dee is, I'll tell you the French for it!' she exclaimed triumphantly.
>
> "But the Red Queen drew herself up rather stiffly, and said, 'Queens never make bargains.'" (Carroll, Alice in Wonderland)

Yet Alice always takes final control however much she is harassed by the creatures she meets. In addition, she is always reminded of things she has learned as she wanders through Looking-Glass Country.

Preservice English teachers, like Alice, move through the glass when they journey through their field-based experiences and gain increasing insights into the teaching profession. The decision to step through the glass, however, is not always an easy one. Listen to Celeste as she shares her decision with us.

The decision to become a secondary English teacher has not been an easy one for me. I have debated and anguished over the idea of going back into a high school and volunteering myself to be locked in a room with kids who probably know more about the world than I did at their age. The negative publicity concerning gang related acts of violence, teenage drug use and the overall deterioration of the education system public schools have received, has not increased my desire to jump into the classroom.

I graduated from a very small 2A school in South Texas where the majority of the student body consisted of Hispanics. Experiences at a 5A high school not only opened my eyes to the immense student population public schools are attempting to educate, but also to the diverseness of the students within these classrooms. I was overwhelmed by the amount of students mingling in the hallways before the bell rang each morning. Not only was I overwhelmed with the size of the school, but also with the attitudes these students seemed to exhibit. Many of the students were cutting up and talking, some were gazing into each other's eyes, and others were staring me up and down. I remember thinking to myself, "Do they think I'm the new kid in town?" As I sat in the back of the classroom on my first day I kept thinking, 'What did I get myself into?" But as I sat there, I began to notice the students were actually cooperating and behaving as they interacted with the teacher and with the lesson content. This class couldn't possibly be a part of the chaotic group of students I observed when I walked into the school before the bell rang. It was then that I realized that even before I had seen the faces of the students I was going to observe, I had already made judgments about them. Hadn't I been warned not to do this?

As Celeste's journey continues, she jots down further insights in her reflective log, a log she will use as the basis for the reflective paper she will eventually turn into her university campus methods professor. Her reflections continue:

My cooperating teacher's class is an inclusive class, some students are considered regular students and others are considered to be special education. My cooperating teacher shares her classroom with a special education teacher. Although I knew there were special education students in the classroom, I never knew who all of them were. At one point or another throughout the class sessions, each student made a major contribution to the class discussion; of course, some students contributed more than others. My cooperating teacher was always able to get the more quiet students to contribute to the discussion, and most of the time, they did not fail to impress me with their observations.

I was exposed to a variety of ethnic groups and socio-economic backgrounds that I had really not come into contact with before. The class was composed of three approximately equal ethnic groups: white, African-American, and Hispanic. I learned a great deal through different viewpoints, beliefs, and understandings that each group and even members within groups held. I got to see how these cultures interact in a school setting. I could see the stereotypes sneaking in -- for instance, many of the students went to Phong Nguyen when they needed academic help, and his grades actually didn't show that he was any smarter than anyone else in the class.

One area where I felt the teacher was not as successful was in the area of reaching students from diverse backgrounds. She did not seem to be able to relate to their background or experiences. Some of her outside examples and stories were not culturally applicable. She seemed to have limited skills in relating to students outside her own cultural experience. I find this to be a severe handicap for anyone of any culture. In a country as diverse as America, survival both economically and emotionally depends on knowledge and experience with other cultures. I would have something or somebody on my wall who the student could relate to and try to build a classroom environment that represents the students and America's diversity

and that would enable all students to feel comfortable and not so alien from my own personal experience.

Another area that is bothersome for her is expressed as follows :

The school requires the students to take a major vocabulary test each semester, and the whole semester is to be spent preparing for it. I guess it was a way of "teaching to the TAAS test." This part of the class and of the semester is dreaded by the students from what I could gather. It made me see how some regulations that go along with standardized testing can hinder the students rather than help them.

For Celeste, she has come to an understanding of self in school settings and the teaching profession when she shares with us the following:

I have come to realize that there is no secret formula or recipe I can find and learn that will guarantee a successful and productive classroom. Instead, the recipe lies within me, and together with my students, we can produce an environment that not only promotes education but celebrates diversity.

Such insights through pre-student teaching experiences continue as students journey through their student teaching semester, as reflected in Michael' s weekly reflections during his student teaching semester.

Week one: A pattern is developing: first period is spent in discussing the course and becoming familiar with the material; second period is spent working upstairs in the computer lab and/or the library; the third period is spent back downstairs making final adjustments and organizing material for the teaching unit. Within this framework I have also become familiar with my mentor teacher's teaching philosophy and, as I learn from the daily tasks associated with classroom management, we have developed a "conversation" which proves informative and stimulating. Today he made a comment which stayed with me: "if it's not fun I'm not going to do it." Indeed, as I observe the classes, he consistently adheres to this

principle while managing to vary important information enough to avoid mere repetition from class to class. I have become increasingly familiar to the students and they are opening up more, which is due primarily to my mentor teacher's conduct towards me in the classroom: he engages me as an equal before the class and, seeing that, the classes respond positively. My mentor teacher tells me that I cannot expect to think that teaching at the secondary level is all sunshine and roses. He has told me that some students will tell you that the only reason they are in class is simply to avoid going to jail. Of course my thoughts turn to loving a good challenge but I cannot help but to suspect my optimism may just be naivity. Fight the good fight I say...

Week two: Seventh period I was allowed to introduce the students to the assignment and the materials available to them for its successful completion. I asked several times if there were questions and to make sure I was being clear. During this experience I realized how easily my mentor teacher related to the students on a level they understand. I also realized this is a more hard-won ability than I thought, though I am not entirely convinced that "learning up" to a level is not such a bad thing if it does not become mere elitism. That is, I can meet them on their level and raise them where they need to go, can't I? Having lunch with the other English teachers is interesting; they are a diverse, stimulating, motivated group. At this school there is a division between adherents of a literature-based curriculum and those who favor a more writing centered, process approach to learning. Some teachers rely on lecture and others involve students. Is this oversimplification? Am I being reductive? I have heard two points of view; there may well be others.

Week three: During lunch with the other teachers, the door to the classroom where we gather was slightly ajar and I saw an assistant principal yell down the hall, "Stop right there--hold it!" and then run right by us. We learned that some kids were smoking marijuana nearby, as the hallway where we were was filled with the reek of it. My mentor teacher and I went to the men's room to check it for anything. This was the excitement of the day, and I think I'm starting to understand that being a teacher sometimes involves reacting to such "sudden occurrences." My mentor teacher related a story of a student who he turned in for what turned out to be acute cocaine intoxication. As it turned out he probably saved the student's life. Rather than interfering, intervening where necessary, he explained, can be the difference between life and death. Real life is at the school, and only a deluded person will fail to recognize that. I am st rting to think that a good teacher has to make learning part of their students' real lives. In order for this to happen, students and teachers have to speak freely about them. Yet I have heard teachers mention the woman in California who was fired for allowing an "at risk" student to publish profanity in a creative work in drama, even though the student was responding positively and enthusiastically. If we are to help such students succeed, we need to be creative and individualized in our approaches to meeting their needs. I have wrestled all day with this question of how we can help, and under what conditions.

Week four: My mentor teacher shared his view of a teaching utopia where students are not evaluated on a grade basis or as pass/fail, but in terms of content mastery. He related that he has failed a third of a class. On the one hand students should take some responsibility for their own education and if teachers are under some pressure not to have many failing grades on the books, then the proposal to use an alternative

system of evaluation sounds reasonable, if it is not necessarily a complete solution to a complex problem.

Week five: My mentor teacher explained his philosophy of service. Today, as we worked in the computer lab helping another teacher, he related that in addition to the students, he strove to help other teachers, particularly as helping them often involved some computer application one teacher or another was trying to use. Given our burdens, I wondered how he found the time, and he replied that preparation and planning, often long in advance, were the crucial elements. Getting there early and leaving late, spending extra hours in mapping out the semester--indeed the year--freed up time to help others. Helping my mentor teacher help other teachers has been inspiring, especially since I do not see other teachers involved like this which, if not necessarily due to a lack of preparation, nevertheless is disconcerting. His example is one I will always endeavor to emulate.

Week six: I find myself vacillating between distance and proximity, between maintaining a formal reserved distance and entering into easy, casual conversations with the students. I want to be taken seriously, but I do not wish to be intimidating or aloof. How can you let them know you care about them and still try to teach them what they need to know? I am beginning to think that there is a balance, but it has to do with timing and the situation at hand. On the whole I believe I do know when to be reserved and when to be familiar. The problem arises when the students do not know which is which, for whatever reason. Then uncertainty sets in: they are unsure of who is speaking--Jekyll or Hyde? If we are to be faithful to them and consistent, can we be consistently both? Or just one or the other, always?

Week seven: Truly I am blessed this semester in working with a bunch of really bright kids! Generally speaking, they are highly intelligent, capable and energetic. They show lots of positive emotion, and they have a great sense of humor. Sometimes at lunch I hear other teachers share stories about problem kids in their classes or trying to motivate those who do not want to be there. Teachers I have seen show a lot of caring towards what they do as well as for the children who they are trying to help. In short, these teachers (generally) are involved with the lives of their students: they are not just 'teaching'--they are interacting with them. The teachers who do this are known to these students and most of the time the students respond in kind. I have heard that male teachers, especially new hires, typically go to "difficult" classes so that they can be disciplinarians. There is also the concept of "starting at the bottom." I have problems with these conceptions, and hope that this is not going to be my situation. Nevertheless, I welcome a challenge, and I think I can have a lot of fun wherever I go. Patience is required, and I have been working on that...

Week eight: It is interesting to see so many different points of view converging during lunch. The teachers in the English department here have distinct ideas for making their program better, and they don't always agree. While being reductive, I see two distinct parties at work here: one is progressive, technologically oriented, and interactive; the other is conservative, traditional, and generally familiar to most of us. However, in high school I have found a familial sensibility pervades: a disagreement among colleagues is natural and somewhat expected: what is remarkable is the degree of civility that accompanies such disputes. We are all on a rather small ship after all, and the ability to cooperate and compromise has clearly allowed this department to go as far as it has.

Week nine: Today I learned the concept of "the teachable moment." The fifth period class is the largest and the most talkative of the day. Today they were particularly themselves, not focused, talkative, etc. It's not that they were being bad, but they certainly resisted the lesson. My mentor teacher decided to upbraid them for their lack of effort. He explained to them why he became a teacher, and why he looks forward to coming to school everyday. Attitude and approach and passion for what you're doing is everything. You can't be lazy, unmotivated, and undisciplined. "Really?" one student asked. I eagerly entered into an extended discussion. Afterward, my mentor teacher explained that sometimes an opportunity arises when a "teachable moment" can occur that is outside the lesson. Certainly the students shared and were given feedback, and they were interested in the conversation and its outcome. They knew we were not just feeding them a line of nonsense just to get them working. Instead, we took time out, talked, and they felt better afterwards. The key to such moments is knowing when to go with them.

Week ten: There really is a large amount of paperwork that has nothing to do with teaching specific classes; it's work that goes with the profession, and there is a lot of it, from progress reports to voting on various measures and people up for specific assignments to filling out committee meeting questionnaires. Copies have to be run off, scantron tests have to be coded and graded, teacher meetings must be attended, and so on. It's endless! The fun part is teaching in the classroom; the rest almost has to be endured as best as possible. If you don't stay on top of the paperwork it can really rear up and bite you. Balancing one's time to include familial responsibilities after the day is through is a tightrope act at best. The planning periods are usually not of a long enough duration to do everything that needs to be done; then work has to come home with you.

Week eleven: Today I showed the students some sites on the internet that I think will be useful for their projects. They have to do a powerpoint presentation and so we show them the internet sites that will be the most useful to them. I was careful to explain that the internet is not some panacea that holds all the information they will need; they also will need to go to the library. One problem I've noticed is the proclivity of some students toward surfing the net for information that has nothing to do with the assignment. Also some students are already experts; others are nervous as if the terminal may bite them. These students I am spending more time with, helping them to save files and import them into their presentations. This sort of individualized pace is helpful to all parties. All in all, a helpful, productive day.

Week twelve: My mentor teacher was not here today so I "stepped up to the plate." The substitute teacher was also sick herself and let me do what I needed to do since I knew the material and the place where we were all at. No problems...man it felt good! I think I hit a home run!

Week thirteen: My mentor teacher and I have actually become team teachers during the semester. We gave a multimedia presentation on Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner." We used Aldus persuasion and a tape of a reading by a person with a nasally voice. Neither of us liked the reading but tried it out any way in the first class. It didn't go so well. We decided that each of us change off doing the reading in the rest of the classes. His was more theatrical while my reading was more poetic, I think: two different readings and yet the results were the same: the students were more engaged this time as well. My mentor teacher worked the slides on the computer as I read the poem. It was a memorable day. I was pleased that my voice sustained throughout the day. I am in better shape than I thought, but still a bit rusty. The semester is coming to a close. Tomorrow is Career Day and I

think I'm ready to meet with representatives from various school districts who will be there.

The experiences heard in both the pre-student teaching as well as the student teaching voices are perhaps best summarized by the voice of Kristi when she shares with us the following:

> Finally, I re-learned something during my experiences that is important to be reminded of from time to time--that kids today are mostly *good kids*. There is so much negative press about violence in schools, the decline of morality, and the degeneration of modern young people that it is easy to fall into the trap of buying into a false and exaggerated image of a dismal future. And even though I consider myself as one who has largely rejected this image, I still find myself at times expecting more rudeness and more frequent discipline problems than I should. My experiences in the classrooms, talking with the kids before and after class and watching them during class and in the halls, reminds me that they are basically the same as the group of kids with whom I graduated from high school--and probably much the same as the group of kids with whom my parents went to school. They are a curious and sometimes amusing mixture of good and bad, reasonableness and silliness, enthusiasm and sullenness that is at the same time exciting and frustrating for the adults guiding them. They deal with some problems and struggles beyond their control and sometimes they make bad choices, but very often they make good ones that go unnoticed. I find that the more time I spend in classrooms and elsewhere with students, the more optimistic I am about them--the more impressed I am by their courage, ingenuity, creativity, and strength. It is exciting to think of participating more fully in their development as learners and as human beings. And the last thing I learned is that it takes effective and caring veteran teachers to bring up the next group of teachers to follow in their footsteps.

In Lewis Carroll's close of Wonderland, Alice, of course, outgrows her fancies, even coming to despise them. Both Wonderland and The Looking-Glass thus appear to stand for becoming grown-up. And like Alice, as the preservice English teachers wander through their journey and find their voices so, too, do they begin to define for themselves their profession. Indeed, they have grown-up and can afford to leave their college days fancies and know they have now become teachers

Referemce:

Carroll, Lewis. Alice in Wonderland, A Norton Critical Edition. Ed. Donald J. Gray. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971.